

NOVEMBER 24

Thanksgiving and more taking

When Thanksgiving arrives, the media coverage is mostly predictable. Feature stories tell of turkeys and food drives for the needy. We hear about why some people, famous and unknown, say they feel thankful. And, of course, holiday advertising campaigns launch via TV, radio and print outlets.

Like our own responses to Thanksgiving, the repeated media messages are apt to be contradictory. Answers to basic questions run the gamut: How much time and money should we spend on the holiday dinner compared to helping the less fortunate? Is this really the time to count our blessings — or yield to ads that tell us how satisfied we'll be after buying the latest brand-new products and services?

Under the surface, some familiar media themes are at cross purposes this time of year. Holiday celebrations that speak to the need for compassion and spiritual connection are frequently marked by efforts and expenditures that point in opposite directions. Within the media echo chambers, a lot of the wallpaper is the color of money.

In its unadorned state, the idea of being thankful is on a collision course with "Thanksgiving" the commercialized media phenomenon. To explore the genuine realms of giving thanks is to pause and mull over good fortune — dwelling on it while hopefully mustering at least a bit of humility and gratitude for life along the way. But the prevalent emphasis on goodies for dinner-table consumption and the big-hype kickoff of the holiday buying season are media cues with widespread effects.

As a practical matter, in the media world, late November brings a ritualized frenzy that makes cash registers ring (or whatever they do these digital days). Anyone who takes thanksgiving seriously as a potential activity for reflection is likely to sense a disconnect with profuse media content that seems to be unclear on the concept.

Whether seen in religious or humanist terms, the deeper approaches to "giving thanks" are distant from what has become the expected from mass media this time of year. Actual thanksgiving might bring the recognition that many people have at least all they really need — and are damn lucky, too, given the circumstances of many human lives on this planet. In contrast, a wide array of media messaging tells us that we don't

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have what we need – and if we can just spend money the right way, we'll get it.

Television commercials are constantly making the case that we should not – must not – be content with what we have. And the ads offer innumerable ways that spending money can remedy the situation. In that sense, much of media keeps stoking the hot coals of unthankfulness – dismissing what we already have as woefully insufficient.

It's easy enough for media outlets to supply something for everyone at Thanksgiving time. We can choose to focus on replicas of some heartfelt sincerity along with facile sentimentality in news coverage. There are plenty of human-interest stories and recipes, plus the obligatory tales of gobblers that encounter or evade the guillotine. But overall, the commercialism pegged to Thanksgiving provides the most powerful undercurrents for the holiday.

Meanwhile, the barrage of publicized attention to Thanksgiving gives very short shrift to the original Thanksgiving. Newly arrived settlers in their new world, we've been told, gratefully received help from savvy Indians who generously shared their food and knowledge of how to prepare for the oncoming winter. And that oft-neglected story, in turn, is rarely examined as a parable for how Europeans who arrived in North America several centuries ago were glad to take from native people – and then proceeded to plunder and kill with a zeal that became genocidal.

Today, some people have bountiful tables while others have very little. On the rhetorical surface, Thanksgiving marks a time of appreciation. But meanwhile, most of all, media outlets encourage us to buy — and forget.

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